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ABSTRACT

This paper reports findings from a study of social adjustments in the face-to-face interactions of four highly original preschool children, and suggests a framework for guiding the social development of gifted and talented young children. Descriptions of the four students' behavior patterns demonstrate the social adjustments they employed in relations with their classmates. Behaviors presented by the four children included a reluctance to join previously established groups, leading to solitary play for long periods of time; reliance on compliance and helpfulness in ways that may limit the development of other approaches to handling interpersonal situations; preoccupation with dominating others; and excessive use of imagination as a social tool. Four teacher roles are outlined that provide opportunities to guide children's social development, including: establishing classroom contexts, modeling appropriate behaviors, coaching effective strategies, and teaching social awareness. Applications of the teacher role-set ideas are demonstrated, using the four target children as examples. (JDD)

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GUIDING THE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF GIFTED AND TALENTED PRESCHOOLERS

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GUIDING THE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF GIFTED AND TALENTED PRESCHOOLERS

During the 1986-87 school year, we conducted a study of children's creative and social behavior in the contexts of a preschool classroom. A major focus of the study was to observe and record on video tape exactly what preschoolers, identified as highly original, said and did in interactions with classroom peers. This paper reports some of our findings in the form of descriptions of social adjustments observed in the face-to-face interactions of four highly original children and suggests a framework for guiding the social development of gifted and talented young children. In this paper we will: (1) review literature related to gifted and talented education in early childhood settings, presenting a list of cognitive and affective characteristics of gifted and talented young children; (2) describe our research and detail social adjustment patterns found in four highly original children; (3) present teacher role-sets designed to assist teachers in guiding the social development of young children; and (4) present examples of the application of teacher role-sets to the guidance of the particular children whose social behavior is described in the paper.

Review of Related Literature

Young gifted and talented children can be found in virtually every early childhood classroom (Kitano, 1982), and in every ethnic and economic group (Sisk, 1979). Many researchers and educators have suggested that the earlier the gifts and talents of young children are nurtured, the better their chances for attaining maximum development in a given area (Fox, 1971; Isaacs, 1963; Johnson, 1983; Sisk, 1987; Whitmore, 1979, 1980).

Although interest about gifted and talented young children has increased in the last few years, actual programs for such children have not met the ever-increasing need (Kitano, 1982; Sisk, 1987). Gifted and talented children, for the most part, are still overlooked, ignored, and unserved in early childhood education settings (Parker, 1986). This situation is troublesome, since we know that many gifted children do not succeed without special help (Kitano, 1982). In fact, the lack of such help early in life for gifted children has been cited as a reason for the wasteful underachievement of many gifted adolescents (Fox, 1971; Isaacs, 1963; Whitmore, 1979, 1980).

Lack of support for young gifted and talented children can often occur because educators may not recognize characteristics that suggest the early development of gifts and talents. Figure 1 contains a list of such cognitive and affective characteristics synthesized from the work of authors in the field of gifted and talented education (Clark, 1979; Hendrick, 1988; Johnson & Hatch, 1987; Karnes & Associates 1978; Lupkowski & Lupkowski in Morrison, 1988; Roedell, Jackson & Robinson, 1980; Roeper, 1977; Schwartz, 1980).

[PLACE FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Even though specialized information and training sessions tend to increase an educator's ability to identify gifted and talented children (Johnson & Turock, 1980; Quattrocki, 1974), a caution should be noted. Young children may not display all, or even most, of the characteristics listed in Figure 1. The more of these characteristics observed in one child, the greater the chance for that child to have general tendencies toward giftedness. However, manifestations of such characteristics may vary from day to day, and be quite spotty in nature (Whitmore, 1985).

These characteristics sound positive to educators, but they do not always insure that a young child will be well-adjusted, socially or emotionally. Young gifted and talented children may not always be successful in social situations. Many times this lack of social success stems from their advanced abilities or talents.

The gap between young gifted and talented children's cognitive abilities and their abilities in other developmental domains can cause some serious concerns. Children whose cognitive development far exceeds their physical development may become frustrated, for example, if they do not have the physical skills to complete a written or woodworking project they could conceptualize quite well. This frustration may be exhibited through anti-social behavior or adult-perceived immature behavior.

Often the expectations of adults for gifted and talented children are too high in developmental domains outside of their area of giftedness. The advanced cognitive or performance abilities of young children may lead adults to expect advanced social and emotional development as well. Even though some young gifted and talented children will exhibited advanced social and emotional development, many more will display actions and behaviors similar to those of typical three, four and five year olds (Roedell & Robinson, 1977). In fact, some children may exhibit withdrawn or agressive behaviors because of the discrepancy between their cognitive abilities and their social/emotional development (Kitano, 1982).

Another possible source of social or emotional problems for young gifted and talented children could be the mismatch between a program's basic curriculum and the children's advanced abilities and interests (Roedell, Jackson & Robinson 1980). Such a mismatch often causes boredom which may lead to withdrawn or

defiant behaviors that suggest immaturity and hide gifts and talents (Kitano, 1982).

Gifted and talented young children may also have a difficult time relating to their same-age peers. Their modes and levels of communication may be too advanced for normal peers. The depth of knowledge and skill development they posess about a special interest may far surpass most, if not all, of the other young children they interact with, making it difficult to start and maintain relationships based on common interests and ideas. The greater the gap in cognitive abilities among children, the more pronounced these relationship problems seem to be (Gallagher, 1975; Getzels & Dillon, 1973; Newland, 1976).

As with any group of children, gifted and talented youngsters have marked individual differences in personal and social characteristics (Gallagher, 1975). It is necessary that we provide them with stimulating learning situations, while keeping their social and emotional life as natural and unburdened as possible (Hendrick, 1988).

The Study

In brief, the study was designed to produce detailed analytic description of the creative and social behavior of four children identified as highly original on the Starkweather Originality Test (Starkweather, 1974). For one academic year, video tape, participant observation interview, and artifact data were collected in the contexts of the preschool these children attended. Findings reported here are based on data analyzed inductively to identify patterns of behavior the four target children used in social interactions with their peers (for a complete description of research procedures, see Johnson & Hatch, 1987).

Audrey, Shirley, Jack, and Gary are the names given to the four young children of primary interest in this paper. Each child demonstrated an advanced

creative aptitude both in the informal evaluation setting of the Starkweather and in the everyday contexts of their preschool (Johnson & Hatch, 1987). Of special interest to the researchers was how these very creative children behaved in social situations with their peers. In the descriptions that follow, we will highlight patterns of behavior to demonstrate different social adjustments employed by these children in relations with their classmates.

Audrey

Audrey was 4 years, eleven months old when the study began. The most pronounced characteristic of Audrey's social behavior was her reluctance to join previously established groups. She frequently selected independent classroom activities and played alone for long periods of time. If she became involved with others at the initiation of a group activity, she participated with peers. But once others had joined together, she would typically stand on the sidelines with her eyes on the floor waiting for an invitation to join that almost never came.

In our data, Audrey was observed playing with only nine of the other twenty-four students in the room. She spent large amounts of time playing, painting, and drawing alone. When she did choose to play with others, she almost always selected girls rather than boys. The child with whom she had the most social contact was Charlotte, a small and passive three-year-old. In interviews, the teacher, student assistant, and her mother characterized Audrey as "a loner" and "a quiet child".

Our analysis revealed a basically shy child who did not lack social knowledge or skill, only the personal will to risk unsuccessful attempts to join others already in groups. An excerpt from video tape data of the sand table demonstrates Audrey's reluctance to join a group, even after being told it was her turn to play in that area.

Audrey comes near the sand table after John tells her it's her turn. She stands at the edge of the table without moving, eyes fixed on the sand. After several seconds, she reaches for a toy near Jeffrey. Jeffrey says: "Oh-oooh" and looks up. She glances into Jeffrey's eyes then looks down. She stands with eyes down for 10 seconds, then (wringing her hands) she leaves the table, stands behind Jeffrey (3 feet away), and watches the children play. She stands watching for one minute, fifteen seconds. Jeffrey glances back once during this time, Audrey looks down, and he goes back to work. Audrey leaves the area.

Audrey is well-behaved and independent and these attributes are highly valued in school contexts. We are concerned, however, that some of Audrey's quietness may be linked to introversion that might lead to social adjustment problems later on. It seems to be the case that although Audrey is comfortable being alone, as the excerpt demonstrates, she is sometimes alone when she would rather be involved with her peers.

Shirley

Shirley (four years, seven months) was very successful using prosocial behavior, or action that benefits other people (Perry, & Bussey, 1984), in relations with peers and adults. Her social interactions with peers were typified by helping, paying attention to the needs and desires of others, complying with requests and commands, and reminding others of rules. It was clear from our data that she was adept at using "pleasantness" as a social tool. She appeared constantly to have a smile on her face and was never observed being aggressive or selfish. The event below is an example of Shirley's primary social adjustment pattern.

In the block area, Gary and Jack have pieced together several plastic rods to make swords. Shirley comes into the area and begins assembling a rod. When completed, she offers the rod to Jack who takes it. As Gary picks up his rod, it gets stuck between Shirley's legs, lifting her dress. Gary looks up, Shirley giggles, and they share a laugh and warm eye contact. Gary extracts his sword and continues sword fighting with Jack. A piece of Jack's sword falls to the rug near Shirley and Jack demands" "Gimme that!" He repeats "Gimme that!" eight times. Shirley stops, hands Jack the piece, and goes back to her play.

Shirley balanced her classroom time between independent and group activities and played with fourteen different partners, preferring girls to boys. She played with Joni, a girl of the same age, most frequently. Adults who were interviewed saw Shirley as "friendly" and "nice". Both the teacher and the student assistant used the term "prosocial" to describe her behavior in relation to peers.

It is difficult to speculate on the breadth of Shirley's social knowledge. While it is evident that she is very successful at doing what she does, it is of some concern to us that she may be relying on compliance and helpfulness in ways that may be limiting the development of other approaches to handling situations involving others, in particular situations marked by conflict. It may be that her narrow set of social strategies will not serve her well as she matures and extends her social contacts.

Jack

Jack (four years, four months) demonstrated the most social sophistication among the four target children. He used a complex array of social strategies to accomplish his interpersonal goals and was adept at adjusting his social behavior to match changes in contexts and play partners. On the negative side, he

had more conflicts, behaved more aggressively, and was more contentious with adults and children than any of the other target children.

Jack played with sixteen different play partners, preferring boys for longer periods of play. He played most frequently with Patrick, one of the oldest and most aggressive boys in the class. Jack had conflicts with both boys and girls and with frequently chosen partners and occasional playmates. Jack almost never selected solitary activities. When he was observed playing by himself, it was usually a strategy designed to punish a child with whom Jack had had a conflict; e.g., "I'm not playin' with you!"

An example of Jack's broad and flexible repertoire of social skill is contained in an interchange he had with Grace as he tried to join her in playing with a new toy at the block center. He used nine different strategies to gain access to the situation ranging from simple request ("Can I play with you?") through denials ("When you say no, you don't mean me, do you?") and threats ("I'm gonna do something and not let you do it either") to outright begging ("Please let me play with you, please!")

In spite of his advanced social skill, he was frequently observed teasing others, disrupting group activities, and being generally aggressive with peers. His teacher reported that Jack "is one that can manipulate people to get what he wants." We agree that Jack is manipulative and believe his frequent disruptions and conflicts are tied to his need to be dominant in relations with peers. Our data suggest that it was very important to Jack that he demonstrate his superior status in the peer group by using coercive, aggressive, and dominating kinds of behaviors. While establishing status and social power is an important element in any social setting, including classrooms (Hatch, 1987a), Jack's preoccupation with dominating others may reduce his chances for balanced social development.

Gary

Gary (four years, eight months) is an only child who takes medication twice each day to control epilepsy. In the classroom, his most salient social characteristic was his ability to use his vivid imagination to generate imaginary situations and involve others in them. He was the only boy in the room who played for extended periods of time in the housekeeping area and he was the only child who divided his time equally between boys and girls.

Gary always seemed to be at the center of a group of children involved in imaginary play. He was adept at generating imaginary situations, maintaining them for long periods of time, and drawing boys and girls from other activities into his fantasies. Frequently, he directed the action, assigned roles to others, and suggested appropriate in-role behavior for others, always staying in role himself.

Gary played most often with Patrick (Jack's preferred playmate as well), but played with every one of the twenty-four children in the class while data were being collected. His talent for creating imaginary situations and his willingness to move from center to center, including the housekeeping area, made him very popular among his peers. He demonstrated considerable social knowledge and skill, including a variety of entry moves and many of the prosocial qualities observed in Shirley's behavior. Although we had some initial concerns about the frequency with which he used his powerful imagination as a social tool, close examination revealed a confident and socially competent child.

Teacher Role-Sets for Guiding Social Development

We have described four distinct social adjustment patterns in four highly original young children. We believe that through careful observations, teachers can generate similar descriptions for any child. Knowing a child's areas of strength and weakness does not necessarily tell the teacher what to do or even

how to think about what to do in the classroom. What follows is a brief overview of teacher role-sets designed to assist teachers in guiding the social development of young children (for additional discussion, see Hatch, 1987b). Following the overview, applications of the teacher role-set ideas will be demonstrated using the four target children of this study as examples.

Four sets of roles that provide opportunities for teachers to guide children's social development are: establishing classroom contexts, modeling appropriate behaviors, coaching effective strategies, and teaching social awareness. Understanding these role-sets gives teachers a conceptual framework for generating plans designed to assist young children in early childhood classrooms.

Establishing Contexts. The basic contexts of the classroom over which the teacher has some control are physical arrangement of space, task expectations for children, and ways groups are formed and maintained. Within the built-in constraints of the classroom, teachers decide how space will be organized and used. Manipulating particular physical features in the room can have a powerful effect on the social interactions that go on there. What children are expected to be doing and how they perceive they are to do it has direct implications for peer social relations in the classroom. In addition, helping children decide who plays and works with whom is a role that gives teachers the opportunity to have an important impact on social experiences.

Modeling Appropriate Behavior. Teachers are very important models for their students. As a matter of course, teachers ought to be constantly aware of their own social behavior in relations with other adults and with children. What is sometimes forgotten is that teachers can sometimes strategically model certain behaviors in an effort to use their powerful effects as role models to

influence positive changes in children who may be having interpersonal difficulties or to target individuals who appear to lack the social skill necessary to be successful in certain situations.

Coaching Effective Strategies. Coaching goes beyond modeling. In modeling, teachers do not overtly identify the problematic situations they are trying to influence as they demonstrate appropriate strategies. The coaching role includes helping children to recognize what they are doing in social interactions and to make changes when behaviors are not effective. Coaching involves the teacher in being aware of what is occurring for individual children, suggesting and demonstrating alternative social strategies, and providing support and feedback as suggested changes are tried out with peers.

Teaching Social Awareness. Coaching is basically a reactive strategy. It makes sense that developing social awareness can be addressed through proactive teaching as well. Social awareness includes helping children begin to understand the feelings and needs of others, to anticipate the consequences of aggressive versus nurturing behaviors, and to appreciate the value of allowing others to join playgrounds even though disruptions are inevitable. Ways to "teach" such understandings include role-playing, class discussions, children's literature, films, puppetry, and activities created by teachers themselves.

Applications

The model proposed here treats the teacher as a professional decision maker. We offer the following as examples of ways teachers might adjust their classrooms and their behavior in response to the social needs they observe in their children. We believe the ideas presented make sense for the children we observed, but we do not believe that these suggestions represent the only ways

to handle these situations or that these suggestions guarantee success. We take the view that classrooms are dynamic social contexts, that the needs of children are dynamic as well, and that teachers must be constantly observing and re-evaluating their classroom practices in order to guide effectively the social development of children.

One area with which Audrey needs some assistance is joining previously established groups. Establishing contexts in ways that help Audrey might mean making more opportunities for her to join others at the outset of group activities by adjusting how groups are formed. For example, at the beginning of choice time, a brief period could be set aside during which each child is encouraged to select (with assistance, if necessary) an activity and set of peers with whom to share the activity. Particular care might be taken to help Audrey get involved in group activities, especially with children who are adept at entering groups; peers can be very effective role models.

Teacher modeling might simply mean making an effort to demonstrate several acceptable entry strategies whenever the teacher has contacts that include or are observed by Audrey. Such strategies as making direct requests, referring to personal attributes of children in the group, or asking questions may be modeled without explanation by the teacher. When such behaviors are made explicit and practiced with the support of the teacher, coaching has begun.

It is important to be sure Audrey sees the need for trying new social strategies. If she has no genuine desire to join a group, the meaning of practicing entry strategies will be lost. For teaching social awareness, the teacher might spend time with the entire group discussing how others feel when they are left out of the group; or small groups could be encouraged to role-play (or dramatize with puppets) the exclusion of someone from an activity being enjoyed by other children.

Shirley does not have an apparent "problem" in her social relations with peers. Our concern is that she relies so heavily on her abilities to appear friendly and compliant that she may not develop the sense of confidence or the skills necessary to deal with situations in which being friendly means capitulating to the expectations of others and being compliant means compromising her self respect. We think that it is appropriate to help Shirley become aware that, on some occasions, everyone needs to assert his or her rights and take a stand against the domination attempts of others. Involving her in situations that require children to participate in group decision making offers an activity context in which opportunities for her to express her opinions could be created and supported. Pairing her with a peer who has well developed social skills might be another contextual change that would help Shirley broaden her repertoire of social strategies. Most preschool classrooms provide frequent opportunities for teachers to model and coach strategies for settling interpersonal conflicts. It may be important for the teacher to begin by helping Shirley come to recognize, accept, and express her own (Shirley's) feelings in conflict situations with peers. This may be modeled by using "I messages" to explain the teacher's feelings about events in the classroom; e.g., "I feel sad when I see you taking toys away from someone else because I know it makes them feel unhappy."

Children can learn to express their feelings to others in any context, but it is especially important in conflict situations. Helping Audrey accept and express her feelings may be best accomplished through coaching strategies that would include a questioning pattern such as: "How do you feel about what Mary just did? Would you like to tell Mary how you feel? What can you say to Mary so that she will know that you do not like what she did?" Teaching opportunities could focus on children's literature related to being assertive with

peers or role playing situations in which a child is taken advantage of because of his or her unwillingness to express personal feelings and desires.

Our objectives for Jack are based on our hypothesis that he behaves as he does because he needs to feel that he is superior in relations with peers. We believe that providing activity contexts in which he can exercise constructive leadership may give him positive experiences that satisfy his need to dominate others. In addition, it seems important to help Jack realize that his contentiousness and aggression are disruptive and sometimes hurtful to others.

Modeling an awareness of the effects of one's actions on others may be helpful, especially when coupled with coaching designed to encourage Jack to recognize and take responsibility for the consequences of his actions. For example, when Jack is involved in aggressive acts directed against other children, the teacher could prompt Jack to consider the feelings of the other children, encouraging them to tell Jack how they feel about his behavior. If Jack is shown the effects of his actions on others, he can begin to understand that there are consequences for his aggression beyond the immediate experience of dominating another child. Group discussions about how those who constantly push others around are perceived are a useful way of teaching the group and Jack about alternatives to aggression.

We have said that Gary is essentially a socially competent child. Interventions do not seem called for; still, based on our knowledge of his high degree of skill at using his vivid imagination as a social tool, we would suggest that the teacher structure contexts and be aware of opportunities for coaching that give Gary practice using other, "non-imaginative", strategies in interactions with peers. This may be as simple as watching for situations in the book center or science center where Gary can interact with others in ways

that do not involve the creation of fantasies, then helping Gary reflect on his successful behaviors in those situations. The goal of these being to help Gary think of himself as socially successful in all kinds of classroom contexts, not just in imaginary play situations.

In conclusion, we believe that teachers can become better able to assist gifted and talented young children (indeed, all young children) in making positive social adjustments with peers. We know that every child has unique experiences, abilities, and attributes. A set of prescribed activities or materials, no matter how carefully designed, will not be effective in meeting the diverse and complex needs of each individual in any classroom group. We see teachers as decision makers who study the situations in which they work and generate alternatives that constantly lead in the direction of making their classrooms better places for children to be. Learning to observe and interpret children's social behavior and then to make plans for establishing contexts, modeling behaviors, coaching strategies, and teaching awareness can provide teachers with valuable tools for making decisions that promote positive social development in the children they serve.

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Figure 1

Characteristics of young gifted and talented children

Cognitive Domain	Affective Domain
is fluent with ideas	is independent
is expressively elaborate in specialty areas	is persistent
learns quickly	prefers company of older children/adults
uses elaborate language	is curious
has a large vocabulary	has high interest in specialty topics
has a long attention span in interest areas	is sensitive to others' feelings
has a large amount of general information	has a keen sense of humor
conceptualizes well	has a heightened self-awareness
sees cause and effect relationships	has an early sense of justice
has unique ideas	has unusual emotional depth and intensity
is fascinated with numbers	has high expectations for self and others
has an exceptional memory	has advanced moral reasoning
pays attention to detail	displays internal locus of control
draws conclusions well	can influence others in peer group
shows an early interest in print	adapts to new situations
is able to delay closure	is looked up to by peers
is highly evaluative of self and others	
gives unexpected, sometimes "smart-aleck," answers	